

Meek Heritage

Hurskas Kurjuus: Päättynyt Suomalainen Elämäkerta

Presented by: Eric Bergman

Nobel laureate F. E. Sillanpää's novel *Hurskas Kurjuus* has been translated into English as "Meek Heritage," a misnomer that overlooks the central politics of the novel. A better (and more literal) translation would be righteous misery. 'Meek' retains the Biblical reference Sillanpää had in mind because, despite all of the poverty, suffering, injustice, hunger, and toil, the meek shall inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5), and this is a novel about a poor and meek farmer. But it is the poor's 'righteous' (*hurskas*) quality—as in being morally right or justifiable—in the face of being trampled upon that is alluded to in the title (see Mäki 225). 'Misery' (*kurjuus*) is a result of this state of poverty, which refers to the existential challenges of living in the far north and, compounding that misery, the wrongs of the tenant farming system (the landed vs. the landless), the money economy, and the general greed that underlies capitalism. Moreover, there is the attempted revolution by the Reds (socialists) and its repression by the Whites (those opposed to socialism) that involved the execution of many rebels after the Finnish Civil War had concluded, including the protagonist, Juha Toivola. Sillanpää's politics in the novel, which was written in the same year as the war (1918) and published in 1919, which is only two years after Finland claimed independence from the Russian Empire (1917), is a courageous attempt to show that neither side in the war was honorable or correct yet the suffering inflicted by poverty, and hence economics and politics, is excruciatingly real. The novel doesn't go as far as justifying the revolution but shows there were legitimate reasons for it.

One definition of a successful political novel might be that, upon publication, it upsets both sides of the political spectrum. The protagonist of Sillanpää's novel, Juha Toivola, whose life trajectory the novel follows, mirroring important historical events in the creation of Finland, becomes a tenant farmer. There is no question that his life's miseries are in large part due to the economic system then in place in which poor farmers, struggling to eke out an existence in the short summers on borrowed land, are squeezed by the land-lords for everything they are worth. Starvation, sick and dying children/wife, and abysmal lack did little to sway the emotions of these self-righteous land-lords. The Whites were upset because the novel so clearly showed why such desperate farmers would rise up. Moreover, the novel is bookended by the summary and chaotic execution of Red prisoners after the war. Though the war was short, roughly 37,000 Finns died out of a population of 3 million, the largest share (20,000) in the so-called 'White terror' in which Reds were executed or starved to death in prison camps (Kivimäki).

The Reds were also upset with the novel because the hero, Toivola, is so antiheroic: he stumbles through life grasping for whatever is before him rather than motivated by any ideological purpose. His participation in the Civil War on the side of the Reds is more based on circumstances (a certain

place at a certain time) than motivated by ideas of justice or a better future. For the majority of the novel, Toivola is apolitical, even as strikes occur in the early 20th century and he is given the vote but doesn't bother to use it. His participation in the war happens due to a "vacancy" he feels after a series of deaths in his family. He also joins the war because he's able to make money and it's 'fun' compared to the dreariness of his everyday life. He never hurt anyone, he tells himself. Yet Toivola has no "comrades": everyone looks down at him or barely notices his existence. The Reds too are greedy schemers indifferent to Toivola's humanity. In line with modernist sensibilities, Sillanpää moved quickly to expose the absurdity of war, violence, exploitation, and the human condition more generally through a biological perspective in which characters are a constituent part of nature.

The other central 'character' in the novel, as in much of Finnish art, is nature. Toivola is a youth in the famine years of 1866–68, when the winters were particularly long, the summers wet, and both unusually cold. As much as 10% of the Finnish population perished (around 200,000 people) in these years. Hence the novel's 'misery' is also geographical, as documented since the times of the national epic, *The Kalevala*: starvation was only as far away as next winter. Politically it appears unjustifiable that, while some are starving, others live in plenty. As with Toivola's father, a drunken land-owner at the fringes of poverty, the better-off take advantage of the more desperate and snatch up their lands in exchange for bread (and homemade booze, of course) during the famine years. Hence Toivola, the son of a landed father, is, by the forces of nature and an ineffectual father, sent to the bottom of the social hierarchy while still a boy. Sillanpää's major theme, both in *Hurskas Kurjuus* and elsewhere, is the entwining of human and nature, the spiritual and the material, and hence the unity of all things. Humans do not so much shape nature as dance in tandem with it, reacting to its forces even as they bravely attempt to overcome its determinism. This entwining of themes and forces is reflected in the formal structure of the narrative in which the pendulum of intentions and events, ideas and reality, inner thoughts and outer materialism (and much more) swings on a short string.

Sillanpää himself was born into a poor peasant family but, due to good luck and also a new enthusiasm based on a budding national pride, was able to be educated, though he dropped out before completing his training as a doctor and moved back to his parents' impoverished forest hut. From there he published his first stories and carefully avoided taking sides in the Civil War. Instead, according to scholar Panu Rajala (1998), he translated Belgian symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck's *Le Trésor Des Humbles* [The Treasure of the Poor], which presented a philosophy on poverty verging on mysticism and gave Sillanpää the impetus to explore the underlying causes of the Civil War.

It is to Sillanpää's great credit that, in the fervently polarized aftermath of the Civil War in which there were clear 'winners' and 'losers' that did not necessarily coincide with 'justified' and 'unjustified' he was able to set out a sympathetic narrative that showed the economic and political context of the rebellion. He brings humanity to this hapless class by including them in the scope of Finnish history even as society rejected them after the war. Moreover, there is a bass note of optimism—the kind that underpins pieces performed on massive church organs—that prevails through the 'righteous misery' of the text's determinism. Nature is of course cruel but there are moments in summer in which one will be overwhelmed by its beauty. Humans of all classes are scoundrels but somehow, collectively, they're all struggling towards survival and the dawning of a new nation, a new people, that will one day prevail. Sillanpää's art is creating a more humanistic national community. Given the context, it is an urgent cry for understanding and mercy in a time of reprisals and hate (hear Jukka Kekkonen on "1919 F.E. Sillanpää ja romaani Hurskas kurjuus").

In much of Finnish art, at least around the founding times of the nation, melancholy is always tinged

with beauty; hopelessness is the bedfellow of hope; happiness is momentary and guarantees upcoming misery. Death in *Hurskas Kurjuus* is sometimes celebratory for it means one less mouth to feed and hence a stronger chance others might survive.

This is undoubtedly a strange kind of optimism for readers outside of the Finnish cultural milieu; it is the kind of optimism, however, that is born from geography—that cold and cruel north, the determinism that guided Sillanpää—and a long history of hunger, death, and starvation, along with sweet plentiful summers made yet more succulent by their shortness. By illustrating the nearly impossible circumstances in which poor farmers in Finland lived, Sillanpää is pushing for a more inclusive and egalitarian politics in the new nation. More than a hundred years after its publication, one can see the fingerprints of this urgently told story in what Finland is today. It was first imagined in a work of art, and politics followed much, much later.

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